

[Small Town Customs]

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Beliefs and Customs - sketches

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Form [md] 3

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Folklore Collection (or Type)

Title Small town customs.

Begin: A wild and woolly...

Place of origin Portland, Oregon Date 3/27/39

Project worker William C. Haight

Project editor

Remarks

Form A

Circumstances of Interview

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker William C. Haight Date March 27, 1939

Address Washington Hotel. Portland. Oregon.

Subject Small town customs.

Name and address of informant Mrs. Ernest P. Truesdell, Canyon City, Oregon.

Date and time of interview March 13, 1939.

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Place of interview Blue Mountain Eagle Office. Canyon City, Oregon.

Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant

Interviewer's former home town.

Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

An ordinary business office of a small town newspaper. Stacks of papers and books piled all around the floor. There was little room for sitting down, but the informant and interviewer finally cleared off a place.

Form B

Personal History of Informant

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker William C. Haight Date March 27, 1939

Address Washington Hotel, Portland, Oregon

Subject Small Town Customs

Name and address of informant Mrs. Ernest P. Truesdell, Canyon City, Oregon.

Information obtained should supply the following facts:

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1. Ancestry
2. Place and date of birth
3. Family
4. Places lived in, with dates
5. Education, with dates
6. Occupations and accomplishments with dates
7. Special skills and interests
8. Community and religious activities
9. Description of informant
10. Other points gained in interview

1. Scotch-Irish, English.
2. May 23, 1881, Griggsville, Pile County, Illinois.
3. One husband, two children, Tyler, Virginia.
4. Missouri, Hannibal,
Griggsville, Illinois,
Canyon City, Oregon,
Reno, Nevada. Dates are not remembered.

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5. High School, Griggsville, Illinois,

Normal School, State of Illinois,

Oregon Normal School,

Summer Sessions, University of Oregon.

6. School teacher, stenographer.

7. Reading, school teaching, recreational guidance, WPA sewing unit.

8. St. Thomas Guild; Chairman, Canyon City Health Association, Grant County;

Episcopalian. 2 9. Mrs. Truesdell is tall, of dark complexion, with iron-gray hair, softly waved about her face. Her face has few wrinkles. She has a pleasing personality, although there is nothing distinctive about her.

10. Interviewing this person was especially pleasant, due to the fact the informant was a grammar school teacher for the interviewer. Mrs. Truesdell's life has been a saga of tragedy and sacrifice, but each year she has gained in affection in the hearts of those who know her.

Form C

Text of Interview (Unedited)

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker William C. Haight Date March 27, 1939

Library of Congress

Address Washington Hotel, Portland, Oregon

Subject Small Town Customs

Name and address of informant Mrs. Ernest P. Truesdell, Canyon City, Oregon.

Text: A wild, and woolly, rollicking mining camp is the best way I can describe Canyon City, when I first came here. The men could throw a ball in the air, draw, shoot, and take a drink of whiskey before the ball would hit the ground. The women, packed a Bible in one hand and, figuratively speaking, a teamster's whip in the other.

Canyon City has produced a strong fighting group of men and women. A few of them have been great — perhaps, Joaquin Miller, the poet, is the most noted. Why should a little village scarcely a mile wide and mile long give to the world so many leaders?

M-m-h—perhaps—because our second name is Disaster. We have been burned out, flooded out, snowed under, and had hail storms that pounded the shingles off the roofs and broke every window in town. We have fought in every war and had a few of our own. Disaster comes fast and often but with each one we arise and go forward.

The last one that hit us was in '37. We're getting a little old to be a re-building the town; still our youngsters are slowly but surely building a finer, nicer, safer town, out of the ashes of the old one. They'll do a good job—its in their blood.

2

The early Methodist revival meetings, were noted for their boisterousness. The preachers that came to town always stirred up plenty of Hell-fear and Hell-raising. Saloons and their attendant evils gave cause for real work for the revivalists. They would curse and revile the saloon element at every meeting.

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At a series of meetings, we had a tall, stately, dynamic, southern revivalist leading the congregation into less sinful paths. His silver tongue could tell the saloon element they were heading for Hell in more ways than you would think possible. The women would hear the tales of Hell-fire and pack them home and unload on their less active religious husbands. It was a standing joke that everybody stayed up an hour later during the nights the revivalist was in town, so the wives could rail at their husbands.

The “Stench of Hell” sermon, as it was later called, started off with its usual dynamic criticism of the saloon. As the preacher reviled the saloons he noticed a slackening of interest, as if there was something diverting the congregation's attentions. He talked louder and more vociferously against whiskey—but still they wiggled and squirmed. Never stopping his flow of vituperation he slowly stalked up the aisle towards the stove to see what was the matter. When he got about half-way there he suddenly stopped talking and his face became contorted with rage and revulsion. Someone of the saloon element had rubbed limburger cheese on the stove and the benches near the stove. The heat from the stove, melting the cheese, made an unbearable stench. In fact it was a smell that surely “smelled to heaven”, and we had to go home. Later the townspeople in speaking of that sermon called it the “Stench of Hell”.

At another meeting this preacher caused a split in the congregation. This fiery revivalist in his plain, blunt, manner criticised rather severely part of the congregation for not agreeing with him on some principles of the church.

3

Old Mr. Dean, a wealthy leader of the town and pillar of the church, arose from his seat and walked down to the pulpit. He told the preacher he resented the criticism and felt that the evangelist had personally insulted him. The evangelist made some critical remark of Mr. Dean to the congregation. Mr. Dean was shaking with rage when he raised his hand and slapped the face of the preacher. Immediately the preacher dramatically turned the

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other cheek. Mr. Dean turned and walked out of the church, his followers close behind him.

This fight resulted in a split of the church which led to the building of a Nazarene church in John Day. The Nazarenes could go the revivalists one better when it came to putting on an emotional religious show. They would roll, rant, tear their hair and scream during their meetings.

The funerals in those days were long, drawn-out, hideous spectacles. The preachers seemed to work on the idea of “anything to draw out the agony.”

At the death of someone all the neighbors would go to the home, bringing food and offering their services to help the bereaved family. Usually close friends would lay out the body, and build the pine box to lay the body away in. If the funeral was held during the winter months there were no flowers. In the summertime people would make bouquets out of the flowers in their yards. The services were held either at the deceased's church or in the town hall.

There was one family that always put on a big show. At the graveyard they would go around to each grave that held a member of their family and weep, howl, and wail, until at times they would faint from sheer emotional exhaustion.

I had a hideous experience when I was seven years old. A cousin Pearl, a girl about my age, passed away. One of my aunts got the horrible idea of having me stand by the body during the service. She said she thought it would be nice for little Maudie to be with little Pearlie until the very end. As long as I 4 live I will never forget the horror that filled me while I was standing there by that corpse.

The songs they sung were similar to the ones sung now. “We Will Soon Be At Home Over There,” “My Mother's Hands,” and “Tell Mother I'll Be There,” are the names of a few popular funeral hymns. The singing of these songs was quite a job. Presumably, they were

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to sound as woeful as possible, which they succeeded in doing. If someone would break down in the choir it made the funeral much more of a success.

I remember one sermon a minister preached that had the whole town in an uproar, The corpse was the remains of a young man about 15. His life had been a "Peck's Bad Boy," sort of existence. If there was any trouble in town you could always figure this youngster to be at the head of it. Still and all he was far from being a lost soul. Evidently the minister thought differently, because he preached a funeral oration about how bad the boy was and where he belonged, and that he always would be in Hell.

Gracious! The town did buzz over this. I tell you, by grab, it was a most unpopular place for that minister. Land sakes, he ought to have been drawn and quartered.

I don't seem to be able to remember many of the medical cures used in our day. A few are so common that I believe they are used around here even today. Note

1. Sulphur and molasses was used for a tonic.
2. In times of contagion we all wore an asafetida bag around our necks.
3. Skunk oil was rubbed on children for rheumatism, chest colds, and other such ailments. That skunk oil smelt to heaven and back again.
4. Sassafras tea was always drunk in the spring to clear the blood.
5. Sarsaparilla roots were used, but I don't remember what for.
6. Mullen plant tea was used for asthma. This cure came from the Indians.
- 5
7. Bacon was wrapped around a person's neck that had the sore throat.

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8. A piece of yarn was tied around your neck for a sore throat. Presumably this would also combat the evil spirit.

9. A rattlesnake's rattle would keep a person from having a headache.

10. One family always tied a copper wire around their children's neck to ward off contagious diseases.

11. A rabbit's foot was tops in warding off any kind of disease or disaster.

12. Rhubarb was considered mighty good for dysentery.

The few superstitions I remember are probably as equally as uninteresting as the medical ones.

1. If you dropped a dish cloth company would always come.

2. If you left your house and had to return it was bad luck. To offset this bad luck you had to go and sit on your bed for a few minutes.

3. If you came in one door and went out another it was sure to bring you and the family that occupied the house bad luck.

4. That same superstition I just gave you also meant that the action would bring you company.

5. If you kept a Buckeye in your pocket you would ward off all evil spirits.

6. If you put on anything wrong side out, you had to wear it that way all day.

7. If the last rehearsal of a show was punk, the performance would be good.

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Every Wednesday a group of neighbors would meet at one of their houses for a Spiritualistic seance. These seances were a major part of my entertainment. I suppose that was true because there was little else to amuse yourself with in town.

6

The meetings were conducted much like any other meetings of Spiritualists. The lights would be dimmed, or completely turned out. Then our medium, who most always was Mrs. Hicks, would start to work. One rap on the table meant 'yes', two raps, meant 'no'. All questions asked the spirit had to be yes or no questions.

Our questions were concerned with marriage, sweethearts, dates, trips, jobs, and, during election time, election of county officials. The meetings died out because Mrs. Hicks got frightened with her mediumistic powers. From her standpoint she became too conscious of the spirit world. I think it is better to let such things alone anyway.

One incident that I recall is of some interest. For awhile we had an outsider for a medium. One of the members was distressed greatly by the fact that her father had been committed to the State Insane Hospital.

The medium told the lady that she could see her father playing tennis and if the lady would go to the hospital the following Sunday she would find her father well enough to come home.

Skeptical, but having to call on her father anyway, the member visited the asylum. She found her father out playing tennis and able to be released from the institution. Oddly enough, this member withdrew from the group and has never touched Spiritualism since. Presumably she was afraid of it.

Form D

Extra Comment

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OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker William C. Height Date March 29, 1939

Address Washington Hotel, Portland, Oregon

Subject Small Town Customs

Name and address of informant Mrs. Ernest P. Truesdell, Canyon City, Oregon.

Comment:

This interview fits in with a series of interviews built around one of the most picturesque pioneer towns in Oregon. The town itself lies at the foot of two mountains. It is a standing joke among the natives that you have to lie down on your back to see the sun.